

Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
Water Resources Division
Water Rights Bureau

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
For Routine Actions with Limited Environmental Impact

Part I. Proposed Action Description

1. Applicant/Contact name and address: Stillwater Conservation District, P.O. Box 48, Columbus, MT 59019
2. Type of action: Conservation District Application to Change Water Reservation 43QJ 30121140
3. Water source name: Yellowstone River
4. Location affected by project: Section 27 T2S R22E, Stillwater County
5. Narrative summary of the proposed project, purpose, action to be taken, and benefits:
The Stillwater Conservation District proposes to add 63 AC in Section 27 T2S R22E, Stillwater County to their water reservation (43QJ 9935-00). Water would be diverted from the Yellowstone River via the Cove Ditch in SESWNE Section 5 T3S R21E, Stillwater County at a flow rate of 1.15 CFS up to a volume of 246 AF for center pivot sprinkler irrigation. The benefit to the Cove Irrigation Company is to increase agricultural production. The benefit to the Stillwater Conservation District is to fulfill the purpose for which the water reservation was granted. The DNRC shall issue a change authorization if an applicant proves the criteria in 85-2-402 MCA are met.
6. Agencies consulted during preparation of the Environmental Assessment:
(include agencies with overlapping jurisdiction)
Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Montana Department of Environmental Quality
Montana Natural Heritage Program
Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program
United States Fish and Wildlife Service
United States Natural Resource Conservation Service

Part II. Environmental Review

1. Environmental Impact Checklist:

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

WATER QUANTITY, QUALITY AND DISTRIBUTION

Water quantity – The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks lists the Yellowstone River between the Bighorn River and Springdale as periodically dewatered. The proposed diversion is small relative to normal flows in the Yellowstone River and was authorized by the Board of Natural Resources in the Order of Board of Natural Resources Establishing Water Reservations dated December 15, 1978, implying that the water was considered available by the Board. Diversion of additional water from the Yellowstone River has the potential to worsen the periodically dewatered condition. The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks holds Statements of Claim and a water reservation that are senior to the Stillwater Conservation District water reservation and can make call on the river if dewatering occurs.

Determination: No significant impact.

Water quality – The Yellowstone River in Stillwater County is not listed as threatened or impaired by the Montana Department of Environmental Quality. The river has a use-class of B-1 meaning it is suitable for all uses with conventional treatment. Withdrawal of 1.3 CFS from the Yellowstone River is unlikely to change the water quality. The proposed irrigation use is by a center pivot sprinkler system. The high efficiency of such sprinklers decreases the likelihood that return flows could degrade water quality.

Determination: No significant impact.

Groundwater - The proposed project would increase groundwater supply locally by infiltration of irrigation water. The amount of infiltration is minimized by high efficiency sprinkler application and quality of the infiltrated water is unlikely to be affected.

Determination: No significant impact.

DIVERSION WORKS – The diversion works for the proposed project are in place and operational and have been for many years. There is no proposed change to the Cove Ditch headgate on the Yellowstone River or to the ditch itself. Addition of 1.15 CFS to the water carried by the ditch has no potential to impact riparian areas, channel form or create barriers.

Determination: No significant impact.

UNIQUE, ENDANGERED, FRAGILE OR LIMITED ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES

Endangered and threatened species – According to the Montana Natural Heritage Program there are no plant species of concern in the project area and five animal species of concern. The animal species of concern are the Golden Eagle, Great Blue Heron, Greater Sage Grouse, Spiny Softshell and Peregrine Falcon. Because the land proposed for irrigation is already in agriculture and no new diversion or conveyance facilities are proposed, these species will not be adversely affected. Mapping from the Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program shows that the project area is not in delineated Sage Grouse habitat.

Determination: No significant impact.

Wetlands – Mapping of wetlands by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service shows no wetlands in the area of the project.

Determination: No impact.

Ponds – There are no ponds in the area of the project at present and no ponds are proposed.

Determination: No impact.

GEOLOGY/SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY AND MOISTURE – Mapping by the United States Natural Resource Conservation Service shows that the soils in the project area are dominated by Yamac loam. This soil is non-saline to slightly saline and irrigation would not lead to saline seep. Irrigation on previously unirrigated land will increase soil moisture, however these soils are well drained and no change in soil stability or quality is predicted.

Determination: No significant impact.

VEGETATION COVER, QUANTITY AND QUALITY/NOXIOUS WEEDS – Existing vegetative cover is agricultural crops and grazing land. Addition of irrigation will not substantially change the vegetative cover. Installation of the pivot sprinkler system has the potential to introduce noxious weeds. Control of noxious weeds will be the responsibility of the land owner.

Determination: No significant impact.

AIR QUALITY – Irrigation of existing agricultural land will have no effect on air quality.

Determination: No significant impact.

HISTORICAL AND ARCHEOLOGICAL SITES – The project is not located on State or Federal land.

Determination: Not applicable.

DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES OF LAND, WATER, AND ENERGY – The use of a center pivot sprinkler system will require energy supply to the place of use. No other impacts on environmental resources of land, water and energy not discussed above are recognized.

Determination: No significant impact.

HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

LOCALLY ADOPTED ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS AND GOALS – There are no known locally adopted environmental plans or goals.

Determination: No impact.

ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL AND WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES – The project does not alter any roads and there are no public roads in the area. No wilderness or recreational activities are within the project area and no land use change is proposed.

Determination: No impact.

HUMAN HEALTH – Irrigation of agricultural land has no potential to negatively impact human health.

Determination: No impact.

PRIVATE PROPERTY - *Assess whether there are any government regulatory impacts on private property rights.*

Yes___ No X If yes, analyze any alternatives considered that could reduce, minimize, or eliminate the regulation of private property rights.

Determination: Not applicable.

OTHER HUMAN ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES - *For routine actions of limited environmental impact, the following may be addressed in a checklist fashion.*

Impacts on:

- (a) Cultural uniqueness and diversity? No significant impact.
- (b) Local and state tax base and tax revenues? No significant impact.
- (c) Existing land uses? No significant impact.
- (d) Quantity and distribution of employment? No significant impact.
- (e) Distribution and density of population and housing? No significant impact.
- (f) Demands for government services? No significant impact.
- (g) Industrial and commercial activity? No significant impact.
- (h) Utilities? No significant impact.
- (i) Transportation? No significant impact.
- (j) Safety? No significant impact.
- (k) Other appropriate social and economic circumstances? No significant impact.

2. *Secondary and cumulative impacts on the physical environment and human population:*

Secondary Impacts: There are no recognized secondary impacts to providing irrigation to agricultural land.

Cumulative Impacts: There are no pending or recent applications for beneficial water use in the area of the project and no cumulative impacts are recognized.

3. ***Describe any mitigation/stipulation measures:*** None
4. ***Description and analysis of reasonable alternatives to the proposed action, including the no action alternative, if an alternative is reasonably available and prudent to consider:*** The only reasonable alternatives are the action as proposed and the no-action alternative. The no-action alternative prevents the producer from increasing agricultural production and prevents the Conservation District from fulfilling its responsibility with respect to the water reservation. The no-action alternative does not prevent any foreseeable negative environmental impact.

PART III. Conclusion

1. ***Preferred Alternative:*** Issue a change authorization if an applicant proves the criteria in 85-2-402 MCA are met.

- 2 ***Comments and Responses:*** None

3. ***Finding:***
Yes___ No_X_ Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required?

If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action: The environmental assessment did not find any significant impacts that would occur due to the proposed project. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not required, and the environmental assessment is the appropriate level of analysis.

Name of person(s) responsible for preparation of EA:

Name: Mark Elison

Title: Regional Manager

Date: 1/10/2019